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ABSTRACT

As a follow-up to a 1989 study, this study examined, via a survey, what criteria business managers consider when hiring college graduates. A survey questionnaire was sent to a random sample of 1,000 Human Resource Managers whose names were obtained from Hugo Dunhill Mailing Lists, Inc. The respondents represented several types of organizations including corporate, public financial, service, insurance, retail, and wholesale. The questionnaire was designed to collect data regarding the hiring practices, job performance criteria, specific course values, and the ideal management profile. A follow-up questionnaire was also sent. The ultimate return rate was 37%. The instrument was patterned after the questionnaire used in the Curtis, Winsor, and Stephens 1989 study. A Likert-type scale was provided for raters to indicate the relative importance of each item on the questionnaire. Results indicated that the most important determinant in hiring practices are basic oral and written communication skills. Three of the top four--public speaking, listening, and enthusiasm--are largely oral communication skills. The importance of written communication competency has increased from fourth to second place since the 1989 study. Findings suggest that those university officials wanting to be of the greatest help to their graduates in finding employment should make sure that basic competencies in oral and written communication skills are developed. Courses in listening, interpersonal, and public communication could form the basis of meeting the oral communication competencies. (Contains 4 tables of data and 11 references.) (TB)

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National Preferences in Business and Communication Education: II

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National Preferences in Business and Communication Education: II

Abstract

A follow-up to a 1989 study, the authors seek to discover: (1) what factors most helped university graduates obtain employment; (2) what specific factors or skills were most important for successful job performance; (3) which university courses of study are most valuable in preparing for entry-level management or administration; and (4) what should be the ideal mix of skills for an entry-level manager. Questionnaires were mailed to a sample of 1000 Human Resource Managers whose names were obtained from Hugo Dunhill Mailing Lists, Inc., a firm specializing in direct mailing lists. Usable questionnaires totaled 370, a thirty-seven percent return. The results indicate that communication skills are most important for business entry-level jobs and career success.

National Preferences In Business And Communication Education: II

Perhaps the key word for American Higher Education for the twenty-first century is assessment -- the "A word." How can we assure the quality of our value-added higher education? The linear thinking that all too often has guided educational change in the past is very much in question at the present.

Particularly called into question is the sufficiency of university students amassing 124 plus credit hours to graduate -- relatively divided between their major, their minor and electives, and their general education requirements. Substituted will be the notion of a competency-based model sustained by multiple assessments of: (1) the product as it is developed (the student); (2) the clientele's wishes (those who would hire the students; and of (3) the process itself (the educational program).

It should be less expensive for corporate training departments of the future to have a part in the nurturance of university graduates. Quality assurances may result in articulation agreements between businesses and specific universities where the university graduates of approved programs will be given employment preferences. Whatever the future linkage, external assessment of the product will affect the process of education.

[Footnote: (The authors are indebted to Charles St. Clair for his research assistance and to the Office of Graduate Studies and Research at Central Missouri State University for providing funding for the study).]

Because of these factors, we continue to be concerned about what employers are desiring in the way of preparation for employees they hire and promote.

We conducted a review of literature regarding expectations of business hiring practices of university graduates. This pilot study of the greater Kansas City area was expanded via a grant to complete a national questionnaire in 1988 sampling expectations and preferences of personnel directors in business, industry, government, and education. We asked four basic questions: (1) what factors most helped university graduates obtain employment; (2) what specific factors or skills were most important for successful job performance; (3) which university courses of study are most valuable in preparing for entry-level management or administration; and (4) what would be the ideal mix of skills for an entry-level manager. The results of this particular study were published in Communication Education, January, 1989.

The present study, sampled during the Spring of 1994, represents a replication of the 1989 study with a different population. The specific data base included a random sample of 1000 subjects obtained from Hugo Dunhill Mailing Lists, Inc, a firm specializing in direct mailing list. One major impetus for the current study was the continuing debate as to what should be included in the university studies component at our university. An impressive number of persons have written to us indicating that our previous data was extremely helpful in developing and supporting content proposals at their universities. Naturally turf protection was frightful. Absence of data and clear crite-

ria, decisions often were made through campus policies rather than through analysis and reason. Oddly, all too often, some of the very skills expected of university graduates -- research, data analysis, criteria development, and criteria application -- were not employed in selecting many general education programs.

In the earlier study we provided an extensive summary of research that gave any hint of answers to the above questions. In this article we: (1) extend the research review of literature before and since that study and (2) indicate the preferences of business professionals in 1994.

Harris & Thomlison (1983) indicate the top three areas where additional communication education appears to be needed -- listening, motivating people, and handling grievances. The respondents saw these three areas as most important to supervisors and middle management personnel. They conclude, "Communication education is in the position to respond to the legitimate needs of the business-bound student" (p. 267).

Smeltzer, Glab & Colen, (1983) indicate that business schools in the U.S. have gone beyond requiring undergraduates just completing courses in business writing and correspondence to focus upon aspects of interpersonal, small group, and organizational communication. Sorensenson, Savage, & Orem (1990) put it succinctly, "In short, today's business schools exhibit strong interest in the field of communication" (p. 148).

Willer, Kristen, & Anderson (1987) compare what is taught about organizational communication and what is practiced in organizations. The researchers find seven communication functions present in most organizational communication training --

transmitting creative ideas, seeking gathering relevant information, explaining to others, managing conflict, persuading, cooperation, and decision-making. Their results indicate. " . . . . that employees do judge these communication functions as important to the accomplishment of their jobs" (110).

Hultz & Gardner (1988) reported on a project by which recruiters used information to make decisions regarding interviewee selections. Data were collected from recruiters seeking a variety of majors. Indications from the project indicate recruiters relied heavily on major grade-point average and communication skills to determine who should be interviewed. According to the report:

> When comparing the characteristics they reported using and the characteristics they actually used, recruiters believed they were using a wide variety of factors with relatively equals weights. In actuality, they primarily relied on major GPA and communication skills when making decisions. (p. 2)

The authors concluded, "Greater emphasis throughout the academic community needs to be placed on interpersonal and communication skills" (p. 3).

Kim & Wright (1989) reported forty-six items considered very important for the former vocational students for their current job performance and for their career advancement. The findings of former vocational students indicate the importance of competencies in the areas of interpersonal skills, communication skills, and problem solving. (p. viii)

Maxson & Hair (1990) noted:

> Employees are a major factor in gaining this [needed] competitive edge. Therefore, employers want employees who have fundamental grounding in basic skills (communication and computation), positive attitudes and orientation toward work, sound study habits and retention capabilities, and specialized application of basic skills (vocational, technical, scientific, and managerial. (p. 4)

Leslie (1990) reported the results of an American Society for Training and Development document Workplace Basics: The Skills Employers Want which proposed to identify the minimal, broad educational standards that are necessary for the U.S. to compete. These standards include: (1) knowing how to learn; (2) competence in reading; writing and computation; (3) communication: listening and oral communication; (4) adaptability: creative thinking and problem solving; (5) personal management: self esteem, goal setting/motivation and personal/career development; (6) group effectiveness: interpersonal skills, negotiation, teamwork; and (7) influence: organizational effectiveness and leadership. (p. 6)

Sanders (1994, May 27) cites the report, Employer Satisfaction which involved 127 employers from industry, commerce, and government. Researchers conducted sixty-two in-depth interviews from the group of employers. They identified, " . . . teamwork as the single most important skill required of graduates. The report also stressed that employers should be more involved in course development" (S1).

Applebome (1995, February 20) noted survey results reported by the National Center on the Educational Quality of the Work

Force at the University of Pennsylvania and the Education Department's Office of Educational Research and Improvement that indicated a lack of confidence in schools and universities to produce needed skills in young workers. Applebome reported:

> Specifically, when asked to rank on a scale of 1 to 5 the factors they use in making hiring decisions, employers ranked at the top applicants' attitudes, communication skills and work experience. They rank at the bottom applicants' academic performance and the reputation of schools attended, and, at the very bottom, recommendations from teachers. (p. C8)

This study was based on plant managers or site managers at 3,000 locations nationwide with more than twenty workers, including office, constructions sites, and factories.

Sorenson et al. (1990) note that the role of communication instruction in colleges and schools of business has received increased emphasis in the last two decades because of the requirements of accrediting agencies such as the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business and the needs indicated by employers including our previous study in particular. (148) Sorenson et al. also tell us that most respondents in their study, ". . . preferred Ph.D.s who have content expertise in first, business education and then, management, speech communication, and organizational communication" (154). Sorenson et al. indicate the realities of campus politics when they say:

> . . ., communication faculty can engage in university governance procedures to insure that communication courses are

taught only in communication departments. In some situations, this defensive strategy is risky politically. Many schools of business have been offering business communication courses for as long or longer than the courses listed by communication departments. Moreover, although this approach may limit the expansion of in-house business communication courses, it probably will not control the de facto content of those courses. (p. 158).

Ideally, collaboration might result in jointly listed courses that are team taught by business and communication faculty.

METHOD

Participants

A survey questionnaire was sent to a random sample of 1000 Human Resource Managers whose names were obtained from Hugo Dunhill mailing Lists, Inc. The respondents represented several types of organizations including corporate, public, financial, service, insurance, retail, and wholesale. The questionnaire was designed to collect data regarding the hiring practices, job performance criteria, specific course values, and the ideal management profile. A follow-up questionnaire was sent. The ultimate return rate was thirty-seven percent.

Instrumentation

The instrument was patterned after the questionnaire used in the Curtis, Winsor, & Stephens (1989) study. A Likert-type scale was provided for raters to indicate the relative importance of each item appearing in the questionnaire. An ordinal ranking by mean scores will be reported.

RESULTS

The data presented in Table 1 indicate that the most frequent factors that are deemed important in aiding graduating college students obtain employment are basic oral and written communication skills. Oral and written communication skills were recognized as most important in helping graduating college students obtain employment. Three of the top four -- public speaking, listening, and enthusiasm -- largely are oral communication skills. The importance of written communication competency had increased from fourth to second place with this survey. Clearly, school attended, grade-point average, participation in campus/community activities, and the accreditation of the program of study appear of less interest in this survey. However, only school attended had an average score of under 3.0, indicating each factor was rated of importance. The greatest changes in positions from our previous study were with written communication, work experience, part-time or summer employment, and recommendations moving up two or more places and grade-point average moving down five places.

Insert Table 1 About Here

In Table 2 our data indicate the relative importance of factors/skills essential for successful job performance. The top five factors appear to be directly related to communication skills. With the exception of enthusiasm moving up to fifth

place and persistence/determination moving down to fourth, the top rated items remain the same from our previous study. Items such as resume, school attended, physical attractiveness, letters of recommendation, grade-point average, and specific degree held all remained at the level of lessor importance garnering scores of under a 3.0 average.

Insert Table 2 About Here

In Table 3 the mean responses on the Likert-type scales indicate that written and oral communication skills are most important. Three of the top four -- interpersonal communication, public speaking, and written communication were emphasized. Management remained as the third most important course for the entry-level manager. The greatest change from the previous study was the drop in importance of public relations, computer programming, and production management and the increase in ranking of business law -- up five places.

The lowest ranked courses include life sciences, political science, mass communication, power and technology, and humanities, fine and liberal arts. These rankings remained relatively constant between the two studies.

Insert Table 3 About Here

Table 4 reflects the mean ratings from highest to lowest importance for an ideal balance of traits/skills a young manager

should possess to advance in an organization. Listening took the most dramatic rise to the top of the ratings from a previous fourth place. The top four items remained the same -- ability to listen effectively and give counsel, ability to work well with others one-on-one, ability to work well in small groups, and ability to gather accurate information from others to make a decision -- all oral communication variables.

Again it is interesting to compare the relative importance given to courses in written communication in Table 3 with the fifth place ranking for ability to write effective business reports being placed fourth on this traits list.

Consistently the ideal management profile indicates ability to use business machines, knowledge of accounting, knowledge of marketing, knowledge of management theory and knowledge of finance as important, but of lesser importance than other traits/skills.

Insert Table 4 About Here

DISCUSSION

From the results of this and the previous study, it appears that the skills most valued in the contemporary job-entry market are communication skills. The skills of listening, oral communication (both interpersonal and public), written communication and the trait of enthusiasm are indicated to be the most important. Again, it would appear to follow that university officials wishing to be of the greatest help to their graduates in finding,

employment would make sure that basic competencies in oral and written communication are developed. Courses in listening, interpersonal, and public communication would form the basis of meeting the oral communication competencies. One way to meet the written communication expectation would be to include courses in rhetorical and business writing. Further, training in interviewing skills would be in order to help the university graduates to maximize their appearance and personality projection as well as gather information necessary for appropriate decision making. Additionally, interviewing courses also provide assistance in developing a list of references, increasing resume quality, enhancing interview poise, etc.

Such factors/skills as technical competence, specific degree held, grade-point average, part-time or summer employment, accreditation of program, and school attended appear to be regarded as of less importance.

The ideal management profile results are congruent with the prerequisite for hiring and for successful job performance. Also, the specific course values tend to further complement this profile. We emphasize that employers do recognize that efficient communication skills are tantamount to success in the business organization. An imperative to provide this training in general education and throughout the curriculum is clear. Data analysis indicated the extreme importance of young managers developing added competencies in interpersonal communication.

IMPLICATIONS

Clearly employers expect a solid grounding in communication

skills for successful entry-level hires. In particular, it is evident that stronger emphasis should be given to training in listening and interpersonal communication. If students do not have the understanding and skills these courses provide they will lack the "outcomes" necessary for effective functioning in the job market, much less the competencies and experiences important to function as a productive family member or citizen in our democratic society.

We believe that business colleges and departments of communication could be served best by working collaboratively to provide the communication skills and knowledge essential for successful managers. Unquestionably, managerial success depends on competencies in interpersonal and public communication as well as the ability to listen effectively and counsel, to work well with others one-to-one as well as in small groups and to write effective business reports. Given the number of complaints we hear from supervisors about the deficiencies of employees in these skill areas, it is clear that as we move forward in the assessment of outcomes-oriented education that several of the outcomes that must be developed, taught, and assessed are communication based. Moreover, since teamwork, or the ability to work well together in the group setting is clearly an important skill required of graduates, we need to practice what we teach and involve employers in course development. Technical knowledge, whether it be machine based or specific knowledge in areas such as accounting or marketing, is of lessor importance than the people skills where communication is the core.

We agree with Applebome's (1995) observation from the survey results referenced earlier in this paper. Applebome notes:

> . . . experts say the survey findings, particularly the degree to which they indicate that employers are divorcing themselves from the schools, are troubling and in stark contrast to nations like Japan, where employers and schools have common goals and strategies. (p. A1)

Clearly the "supply side and demand side" must respect one another and cooperate in producing a product both sides can endorse.

Utilizing a professional advisory council is one excellent means of soliciting input from prospective employers on curricular matters. Curtis, Graves, and Winsor (1991, October) note, ". . . evolving an effective curriculum to meet the changing demands in the preparation of communication practitioners is the primary reason for establishing and maintaining an advisory council" (p. 510). We echo that rationale and strongly urge communication and management departments to utilize this invaluable resource in course development and refinement. While we recognize that employers are a heterogeneous group with varied views of what graduates need, their input certainly is one important indicator of a quality program.

Isn't it time that we give up the turf battles that separate us and join together in addressing the needs of our graduates so they can compete successfully in the workplace of the twenty-first century?

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TABLE 1

Factors Most Important in Helping Graduating College Students Obtain Employment

Rank/Order	Factors/Skills Evaluated	Score	Previous Study Rank
1	Oral (speaking) communications	4.667	1
2	Written communication skills	4.321	4
3	Listening ability	4.293	2
4	Enthusiasm	4.260	3
5	Technical competence	4.176	5
6	Work experience	4.071	8
7	Appearance	3.931	6
8	Poise	3.878	7
9	Resume	3.749	9
10	Part-time or summer employment	3.493	12
11	Specific degree held	3.308	10
12	Leadership in campus/community activities	3.290	14
13	Recommendations	3.248	16
14	Accreditation of program activities	3.194	13
15	Participation in campus/community activities	3.184	15
16	Grade-point average	3.168	11
17	School attended	2.648	17

TABLE 2

Factors/Skills Important For Successful Job Performance

Rank/Order	Factors/Skills Rated as Important	Score	Previous Study Rank
1	Interpersonal/human relations skills	4.593	1
2	Oral (speaking) communication skills	4.515	2
3	Written communication skills	4.346	3
4	Enthusiasm	4.265	5
5	Persistence/determination	4.110	4
6	Technical competence	4.088	6
7	Work experience	3.988	8
8	Personality	3.870	7
9	Poise	3.807	10
10	Dress/grooming	3.750	9
11	Interviewing skills	3.454	11
12	Specific degree held	2.936	12
13	Grade-point average	2.681	14
14	Letters of recommendation	2.604	17
15	Physical attractiveness	2.604	13
16	School attended	2.258	16
	Resume (excluded in current study)		15

TABLE 3

Courses of Importance for Entry-level Managers

Rank/Order	Courses	Score	Previous Study
1	Written communication	4.428	1
2	Interpersonal communication	4.351	2
3	Management	4.043	3
4	Public Speaking	3.936	4
5	Ethics in management	3.930	5
6	Personnel management courses	3.822	6
7	Financial management	3.700	7
8	Marketing	3.480	9
9	Public relations	3.479	12
10	Accounting	3.386	11
11	Mathematics	3.362	10
12	Business law	3.361	17
13	Computer programming	3.346	8
14	Statistics	3.309	14
15	Social and behavioral sciences	3.261	16
16	Production management	3.243	13
17	Economics	3.194	15
18	Humanities, fine and liberal arts	2.859	19
19	Power and technology	2.761	18
20	Mass communication	2.709	20
21	Political science	2.658	21
22	Life sciences	2.536	22

TABLE 4

Ideal Management Profile

Rank	Trait/Skill	Score	Previous Study Rank
1	Ability to listen effectively and counsel	4.662	4
2	Ability to work well with others one-on-one	4.641	1
3	Ability to work well in small groups	4.598	3
4	Ability to gather accurate information from others to make a a decision	4.483	2
5	Ability to write effective business reports	4.311	6
6	Ability to give effective feedback (appraisal)	4.293	5
7	Knowledge of job	4.126	7
8	Ability to present a good public image for the organization	4.068	8
9	Ability to use computers	3.928	9
10	Knowledge of finance	3.379	11
11	Knowledge of management theory	3.326	10
12	Knowledge of marketing	3.277	12
13	Knowledge of accounting	3.189	13
14	Ability to use business machines	3.137	14